



Socio-Economic Determinants and Working Conditions of Inter-State Migrant Labourers from West Bengal to Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Inter-state labour migration is an important dimension of India's political economy, reflecting regional disparities in employment, wages, livelihood opportunities, and socio-economic development. This study shows that the socio-economic determinants of labour migration from West Bengal to Kerala and critically analyses the working conditions and economic experiences of migrant labourers in the destination place. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining primary survey data with relevant secondary data and policy documents. The research examines the motivations for migration, income differentials, employment conditions and socio-economic changes related to migration. The findings suggest that limited employment opportunities and relatively low earnings in the place of origin were significant push factors. In contrast, higher wages, regular employment, and high labour demand in Kerala serve as major destination factors, which are very significant pull factors. Although migration plays a leading role in improving economic conditions and livelihood security. In addition, migrant workers also face challenges relating to occupational vulnerability, housing, social protection and access to welfare provisions. The study highlights the need for inclusive labour

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Introduction:

Labour migration is one of the most important present-defining characteristics of India's changing political economy, reflecting constant regional disparities in economic development, employment opportunities and wage structures. If we look at internal migration, it has traditionally been an important factor underpinning economic growth and labour market adjustment. In recent decades, the mobility of labour across borders has increased substantially, driven by uneven patterns of industrialisation and regional development. Migration is an important livelihood strategy of millions of households as it enables workers to access better employment opportunities and makes a significant contribution to the economies of source and destination states. Due to rapid economic growth, demographic transition, and increasing demand for migrant workers in labour-intensive sectors such as construction, manufacturing, hospitality, transportation, fishing, plywood factories, and agriculture, Kerala has been emerging as one of the core destination states for inter-state migrant labour in India. West Bengal too has emerged as a major source state due to massive unemployment and underemployment, declining agricultural profitability, and limited scope for industrial employment. At present, migration from West Bengal to Kerala is one of the largest labour migration corridors in contemporary India (Reja & Das, 2019). From a political economy perspective, labour migration is not just an individual economic decision but is embedded in larger structural transformations in labour markets, state policies and regional inequalities. Individual labour mobility is influenced by migration decisions and employment outcomes, which are shaped by the interaction among capital accumulation, labour demand, demographic change, and institutional arrangements (Roy & Raman, 2024). While migration provides opportunities for higher earnings and better living conditions, migrant workers are often in precarious employment, poor housing conditions, occupational hazards, limited access to social security and language barriers, which expose them to risk of multiple forms of socio-economic vulnerability (Peter et al., 2020). These movements can be fruitfully interpreted within classical theories of migration. Lee's Push–Pull Theory suggested that migration is driven by negative factors in the place of origin and positive factors in the destination. The Harris–Todaro model (1970) also assumes that migration decisions are based on expected income differentials rather than actual wage levels. These theoretical perspectives remain relevant in explaining the movement of labour from economically backward regions such as West Bengal to relatively prosperous states such as Kerala. Whenever internal migration has received growing attention from scholars in recent years, there remains a need for empirical studies that integrate the socio-economic determinants of migration with the working and living conditions of migrant labourers within a political



economy framework. The present study attempts to fill this gap and explores the factors affecting labour migration from West Bengal to Kerala. It examines the socio-economic experiences of migrant workers based on primary survey data collected from 86 respondents. The study adds to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence to inform labour policy, social protection and migration governance in India.

Review of literature:

Internal labour migration has attracted growing scholarly interest because of its role in shaping regional development, labour markets and household livelihoods. Migration has been examined from several theoretical perspectives, including economic, sociological and political economy perspectives. However, comprehending the complex nature of migration would require an integrated understanding of its structural determinants and consequences for migrant workers. Mishra (2016) contends that internal migration in India is intrinsically connected to differential regional development and continuity of economic disparities. Migration is an important livelihood strategy for rural households with limited employment opportunities, says the author. However, the benefits of migration are often undermined by job insecurity, lack of adequate social protection and weak institutional support for migrant workers. Reja and Das (2019) find that, in the case of migration from West Bengal to Kerala, the key drivers are wage differentials, employment opportunities, and social networks. Their study shows that existing migrant networks considerably reduce migration costs and uncertainties, enabling continuous labour flows between the two states. The authors contend that demographic ageing and rising educational attainment of local workers have led to labour shortages in Kerala, which have, in turn, increased dependence on interstate migrant labour. Peter et al. (2020) discuss the inclusion of interstate migrant workers in Kerala's labour market and welfare system. Their findings show that migrant workers have become essential for sectors including construction, manufacturing and services. Kerala has undertaken comparatively progressive welfare initiatives, but migrant workers still face barriers in accessing healthcare, social security, legal protection and public services. The study emphasises the need for stronger institutional mechanisms to enhance labour welfare and social inclusion. According to Roy and Raman (2024), a more comprehensive view of political economy reveals that labour migration is associated with demographic shifts, state policies, and structural changes in the labour market. The economic development of Kerala is increasingly reliant on migrant labour, and it emphasises the importance of effective labour governance for sustainable development.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2021), migrant workers worldwide are confronted with the challenges of wage insecurity, occupational safety, informal employment, and inadequate access to social protection. These vulnerabilities have been exposed by recent economic disruptions, highlighting the

need for inclusive labour market institutions and portable social security systems. While previous studies have made considerable progress in understanding internal labour migration in India, much of the existing literature has examined migration determinants, labour market outcomes, or welfare issues in isolation. Fewer studies have integrated these dimensions into a political economy framework, with a specific focus on migrant workers from West Bengal who work in Kerala. The present study attempts to fill this gap by combining primary survey evidence with wider structural analysis, with a view to offering an in-depth understanding of the socio-economic determinants, working conditions and policy implications of inter-state labour migration.

Research Gap: The existing studies on inter-state labour migration in India have largely focused on migration trends, wage differentials, remittance patterns, and the economic contribution of migrant workers. The growing dependence of Kerala on migrant labour and the socio-economic conditions of interstate migrants have been studied by several scholars. Most of the studies, however, focus on the determinants of migration and labour outcomes separately. In addition, there is a relative lack of empirical research that employs a political economy perspective to analyse the interrelationships among regional economic disparities, labour market dynamics, and institutional factors in shaping both migration decisions and the working conditions of migrant labourers. Also, there is little empirical evidence from primary survey data that specifically examines the migration corridor between West Bengal and Kerala. The present study fills these lacunae by integrating the socio-economic determinants of migration with the employment experiences and working conditions of migrant labourers, thus providing a more holistic understanding of the inter-state labour migration and its policy implications.

Research Objectives:

1. To study the socio-economic determinants of interstate labour migration from West Bengal to Kerala.
2. To study the working conditions, economic benefits and problems of migrant workers working in Kerala.

Methodology: The present study is based on a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the socio-economic determinants of inter-state labour migration and the working conditions of migrant labourers from West Bengal to Kerala. The mixed methods approach provides a fuller picture of migration by combining statistical evidence, respondents' experiences, and perceptions. The study is descriptive and analytic in nature. Primary data were collected from migrant labourers from West Bengal working in various sectors in Kerala by using a structured interview schedule. The questionnaire had closed-ended and open-ended questions on the socio-demographic profile of the

respondents, migration history, employment profile, wage differentials, remittance behaviour, working conditions, access to welfare schemes, and perceptions of socio-economic change after migration. Contextual support for the analysis was derived from secondary data collected from government reports, the Census of India, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), reports of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, publications of the Government of Kerala, academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and reports published by international organisations.

The study was conducted on interstate migrant labourers from West Bengal working in Kerala by using purposive sampling. There was no full sampling frame, and the migrant population was scattered, so respondents were approached through workplaces and migrant networks. The survey was conducted among 86 migrant labourers across various occupational sectors, including construction, manufacturing, domestic work, plantation activities, and other informal occupations. The data collected were coded and entered into Microsoft Excel for preliminary processing, and thereafter analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Socio-economic characteristics of respondents and migration patterns were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations. The qualitative data collected from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to supplement the quantitative results and provide richer insights into migrants' employment experiences and living conditions.

Result and discussion:

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents: The socio-demographic profile of migrant workers reveals the nature and pattern of inter-state labour migration from West Bengal to Kerala. The survey was conducted among 86 migrant labourers working in various occupational sectors in Kerala. The findings show that labour migration remains male-dominated, but female participation has emerged in specific sectors, such as domestic work.

Table no.1: Gender division

Gender	frequency	percentage (%)
Male	76	88.4
Female	10	11.6
Total	86	100.0

*Table 1**Source: field Survey data*

The respondents' demographics revealed that 88.4% were male and 11.6% were female. This gender imbalance is mirrored in the occupational structure of interstate labour migration, where physically demanding sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and plantation activities are largely dominated by male workers. Female migrants were overwhelmingly concentrated in domestic service and other informal jobs. Here, female participation in interstate migration has increased, but labour migration to Kerala is still largely dominated by male workers, owing to the nature of available employment.

Occupational Distribution of Migrant Labourers: The occupational profile brings out the contribution of migrant workers to the labour market of Kerala. The state's economy is characterised by diverse demand for migrant labour, as evidenced by respondents' employment across a variety of sectors.

Table no.2: Occupational Distribution

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Construction	41	47.7
Cardamom Factory	20	23.3
Domestic Work	14	16.3
Wood Crafting	6	7
Plywood Industry	3	3.5
Others	2	2.3
Total	86	100

*Table 2**Source: Primary field survey data*

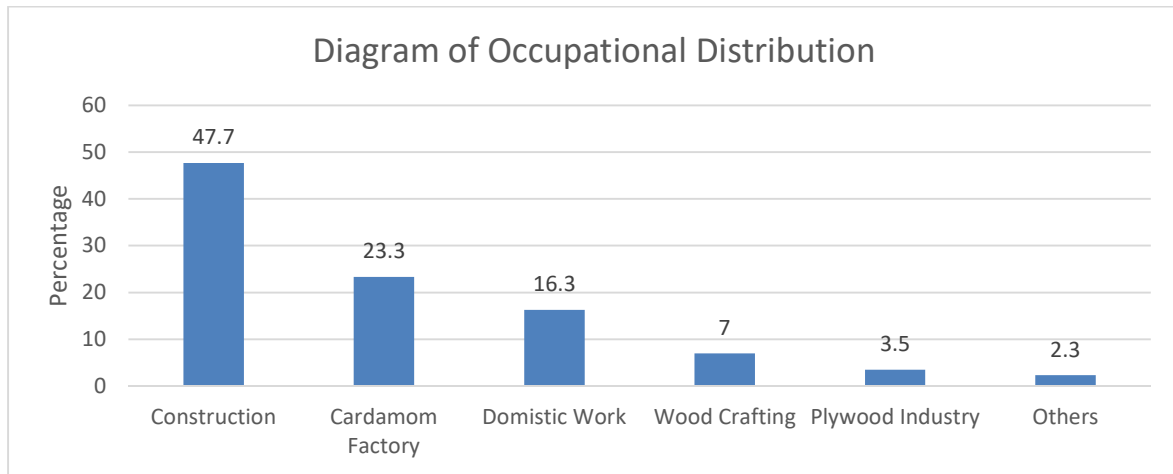
*Chart 1**Source: Primary field survey data*

Table no.2 shows that nearly half (47.7 per cent) of the respondents were employed in the construction sector, indicating that construction remains the largest employer of interstate migrant workers in Kerala. Of the respondents, 23.3 per cent were engaged in plantation-based work, mainly in cardamom processing, and 16.3 per cent in domestic work. Plywood manufacturing and woodcrafting jobs, by comparison, had smaller shares.

The preponderance of migrant workers in labour-intensive jobs indicates that the state's economic growth remains heavily dependent on migrant labour in sectors with a shortage of local workers. Herein, the construction and manufacturing sectors in Kerala have become major destinations for interstate migrant workers in India due to higher wages and sustained labour demand.

Economic Outcomes of Migration: One of the main goals of labour migration is to improve household income and economic security. The survey results show that migration has created positive economic impacts for the majority of the respondents.

Table no.3 : Economic Outcomes

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Improved	59	68.6
No Significant Change	15	17.4

Neutral	12	14
Total	86	100

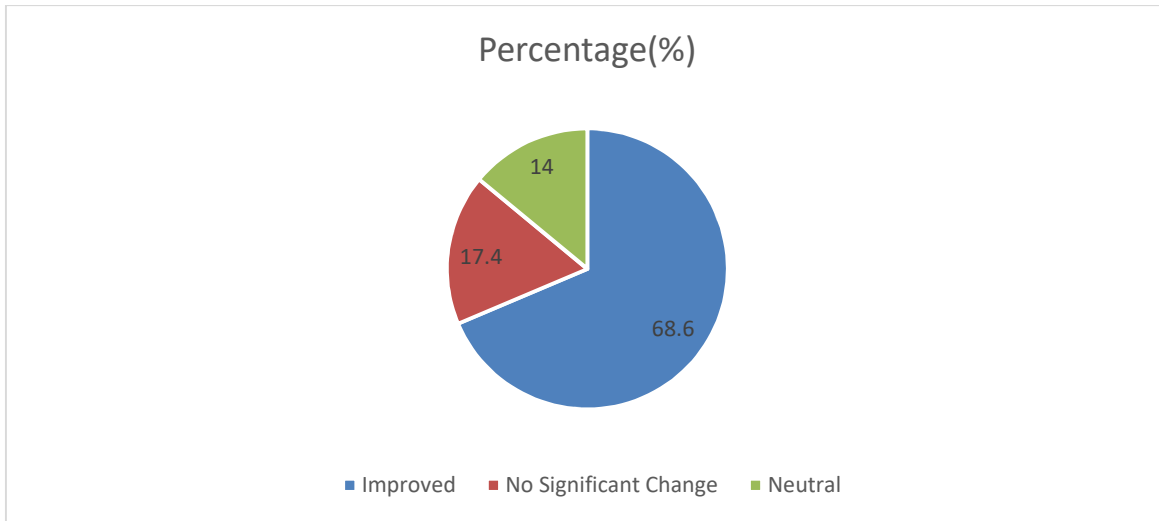
*Table 3**Source: Field survey data**Chart 2**Source: Primary data*

Table no.3 shows that a large majority (68.6 per cent) of respondents reported an improvement in their economic condition after migrating to Kerala. Only 17.4 per cent said that they had not experienced a significant improvement through migration, while 14.0 per cent were neutral. These findings suggest interstate migration is a critical livelihood strategy because it enables workers to earn higher incomes than they could in their home state.

Better earnings have also led to regular remittances to households in West Bengal, improving their living standards, children's education, debt repayment and household consumption. Migration is an important mechanism for reducing household economic vulnerability in areas with limited employment opportunities. Likewise, Lee's (1966) Push–Pull Theory argues that income differences between regions remain one of the most important factors affecting labour mobility.

Experience of Marginalisation: Migration has created economic opportunities, but has not removed all vulnerabilities. Respondents were therefore asked if they had experienced discrimination or marginalisation in their workplace or daily lives.

Table no.4: Experience of Marginalisation

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	4	4.7
No	82	95.3
Total	86	100

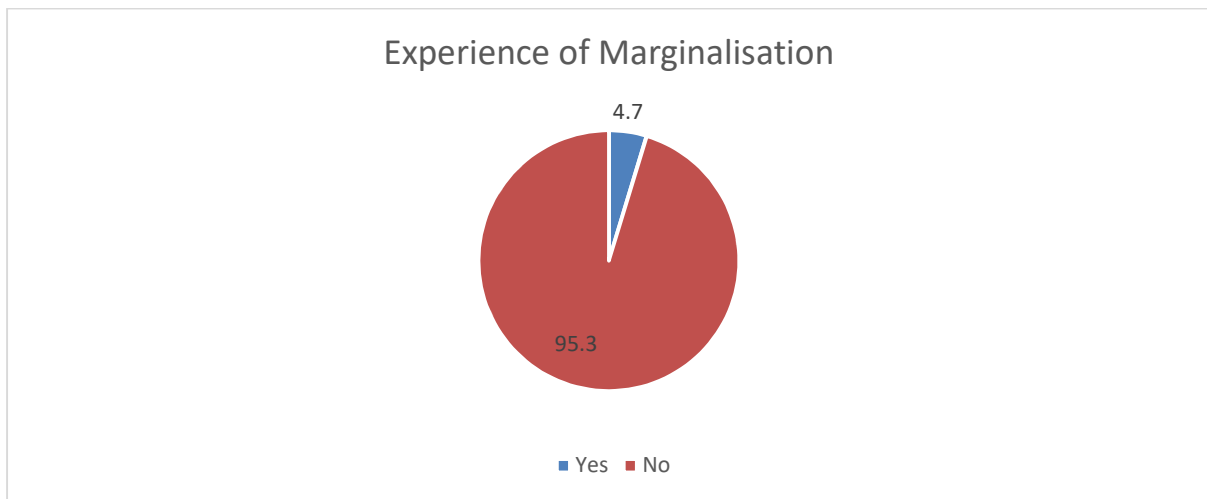
*Table 4**Source: Primary field survey data**Chart 3**Source: Primary data*

Table no.4 shows that the results indicate that 95.3 per cent of respondents reported not having been marginalised, and 4.7 per cent reported some form of discrimination. It suggests that the overwhelming majority of respondents perceived Kerala as a relatively inclusive labour market in comparison with many other migration destinations. However, the experiences of the minority who experienced marginalisation suggest that social inclusion is still uneven and that institutional mechanisms are still needed to protect migrant workers from discrimination and workplace vulnerability.

Conclusion: The emergence of inter-state labour migration as a significant livelihood strategy for workers from economically backward regions indicates the persistence of regional disparities in employment opportunities and income in India. The present study has analysed the socio-economic determinants of migration from West Bengal to Kerala, as well as the working conditions and economic outcomes of



migrant labourers, using primary data collected from 86 respondents. The findings suggest that limited employment opportunities and low levels of wages in the source region are the main push factors for migration. Higher wages, regular employment, and better livelihood opportunities in Kerala are the main pull factors. Furthermore, the study shows that migration has enhanced the economic conditions of most respondents via increased earnings and regular remittances. However, migrant workers continue to face issues of informal employment, occupational hazards, lack of access to welfare schemes and varying levels of social protection. The findings support the political economy argument that labour migration is driven by structural inequalities, labour market factors and institutional arrangements, not solely by individual choice. Making labour governance stronger, broadening access to social security, and improving coordination between source and destination states are thus critical to the welfare, dignity, and socio-economic inclusion of interstate migrant workers. The study adds to the growing literature on internal labour migration and provides empirical evidence useful for labour policies and future research on migration and regional development.

Policy implications: This study has important implications for labour governance and migration policy in India.” Economic differences remain the primary driver of inter-state labour migration, so policy measures should aim to improve employment opportunities in source regions and ensure decent working conditions in destination states. The Governments of West Bengal and Kerala should enhance inter-state coordination to develop an integrated framework for the registration, monitoring, and welfare of migrant workers. Such coordination could enable the portability of social security benefits and access to public services. There should also be greater emphasis on enforcing labour laws to ensure migrant labourers receive fair wages, occupational safety, timely wage payments, and secure working environments. Multilingual information campaigns and labour facilitation centres can help raise awareness of welfare schemes and enhance migrants’ access to health insurance, legal assistance and other social protection measures. In addition, greater investments in affordable housing, healthcare and skills development programmes would improve the living conditions and long-term employability of migrant workers. These measures would not only improve the socio-economic well-being of migrant labourers but also promote a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable labour market in India.

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